Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Testimony

STATEMENT OF

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USDA FOREST SERVICE

Before the

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

United States House of Representatives

Concerning

WILDLIFE HABITAT

MADAM CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

I am pleased to appear before you today to discuss wildlife habitat research for the Forest Service. I am Robert Lewis,, Deputy Chief for Research. I am accompanied by Dr. Frank Thompson, who specializes in research of neotropical migratory birds and the silviculture and ecology of the upland central hardwood forests of Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio.

Today I will give an overview of Forest Service research, briefly discuss significant wildlife research being conducted, and describe our work around the nation regarding neotropical migratory birds.

OVERVIEW

Forest Service research is a broad-based program that addresses critical environmental topics such as biodiversity, global change, threatened and endangered species, population viability, and ecosystem sustainability. We operate one of the nation's largest and most diverse organization for natural resources research. Forest Service scientists, representing numerous disciplines, work closely with land managers on the national forests and grasslands to ensure that science and technology programs are responsive to stewardship needs. Researchers work with states and federal agencies, and non-governmental groups on a broad array of scientific and environmental studies. Forest Service scientists have participated in all major ecological assessments such as the President's Northwest Forest Plan, Columbia River Basin Assessment, Southern Appalachian Assessment, Sierra Nevada Ecosystem Project and Assessment, and Interregional Habitat Conservation Assessments.

WILDLIFE RESEARCH

The National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA) regulations mandate that the Forest Service, in a multiple use context, manage fish and wildlife habitat to maintain viable populations of existing native and desired non-native vertebrate species, including threatened, endangered, and sensitive species. Much of the Forest Service wildlife research program is guided by the need under the viability provision of NFMA to maintain viable wildlife populations.

All wildlife species have important roles and functions in ecosystems, a fact that must be considered in land management practices. Historically, research for wildlife management, whether on federal, state, or private lands, was concerned primarily with game species such as ruffed grouse, quail, and turkey and ungulates such as deer, elk, and moose. This emphasis came from the interest and funding from hunters. Beginning in the 1970's, Forest Service scientists recognized the need for information about non-game species. Today, in addition to the more traditional research on elk, studies are underway on the life history, habitat, and populations of forest carnivores, neotropical migratory birds, amphibians, and reptiles. Research by state agencies and universities is further augmenting our knowledge of wildlife species and habitat and the application of this science to land management.

With the wide diversity of habitat on national forests and grasslands, and the number of species dependent upon them, land managers use the science that results from this research to prioritize wildlife habitat management for species and habitats of greatest concern.

Over the last several years, we have focused our-wildlife research on species with declining populations, as population declines are often indicators of unsustainable forest ecosystems and habitats. There are currently over 1,100 species of animals and plants that are federally listed threatened or endangered species; approximately 360 of these occur on national forests and grasslands. Another 2,500 species are noted by the Forest Service as sensitive species for which population viability is a concern.

Researchers have developed or are developing conservation and monitoring guidelines for many threatened, endangered, and sensitive species such as the red-cockaded woodpecker, all species of spotted owls, Puerto Rican parrot, northern goshawk, marbled murrelet, Southwestern willow flycatcher, and forest carnivores (lynx, pine marten, fisher, and wolverine). Examples of other research underway are:

In California, researchers are developing and testing monitoring methods for a variety of wildlife species, including many threatened and sensitive species such as the California spotted owls, marbled murrelet, and several amphibians.

In the Rocky Mountains, researchers are investigating the habitat requirements and population dynamics of several highly controversial threatened species such as the Mexican spotted owl, Southwestern willow flycatcher, and lynx. Forest Service scientists are providing land managers with habitat management guidelines as well as leading interagency recovery efforts.

Wildlife habitat research programs are conducted at over 20 locations at all regional research stations throughout the continental United States, Puerto Rico and Hawaii. Major research includes recovery of threatened and endangered species, population viability, declining populations of neotropical migratory birds, forest fragmentation, and maintenance and restoration of riparian communities. Virtually all terrestrial vertebrate taxa (i.e., birds, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians) are being studied, but at almost all locations there is a major program focus on birds.

NEOTROPICAL MIGRATORY BIRDS The Subcommittee has expressed an interest in the scientific research regarding neotropical migratory birds. Neotropical migratory birds are a diverse group of more than 250 species such as thrushes, warblers, tanagers, and hummingbirds that can be found in virtually every terrestrial habitat in North America. These species breed in North America and migrate to overwinter- in Central and Latin America. Approximately 27 percent of these species are thought to be in decline. There is significant debate about the cause of declines with evidence pointing towards forest fragmentation on the breeding grounds in North America and habitat loss on the wintering grounds in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Neotropical migratory birds use a diversity of habitats including grasslands, shrub-scrub, regenerating forests, mature forests, old forest, and suburban-urban areas. They breed in all stages of forest succession; some species of birds will only occur in early-succession forest habitat and, as the forest regenerates and matures, these species will gradually disappear. Conversely, species using mature stages of forest succession will not be present in young stands, but will begin to appear and flourish as the forest matures. Thus, a mix of early, mid, and mature forest habitat is necessary to provide habitat for various bird communities within each forest cover type.

In addition to our research, the Forest Service works closely with state and other federal agencies, academic institutions, non-government organizations, and citizens on a program called Partners in Flight. Partners in Flight is a comprehensive conservation program aimed at focusing resources on the improvement of monitoring, research, management, and education programs involving neotropical migratory birds and their habitats. The overall strategy is to prioritize species and habitats of greatest concern and develop a framework for long-term ecosystem conservation.

In conjunction with involvement with Partners in Flight, Forest Service scientists provide land managers with current information on avian habitat requirements, population trends, and monitoring techniques. Land managers use all of this information to decide on land management practices; these actions are aimed at stopping population declines that might lead to threatened or endangered species status.

SUMMARY

Madam Chairman, all wildlife species have important roles and functions in ecosystems and must be considered in land management practices. The National Forest Management Act regulations mandate the Forest Service manage fish and wildlife habitat to maintain existing native and desired non-native vertebrate species. With the wide diversity of habitat on national forests and grasslands, and the number of species dependent upon them, land managers use the results of research to prioritize species and habitats of greatest concern for wildlife habitat. One important goal is to halt population declines that might lead to threatened or endangered species status.

Madam Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

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